

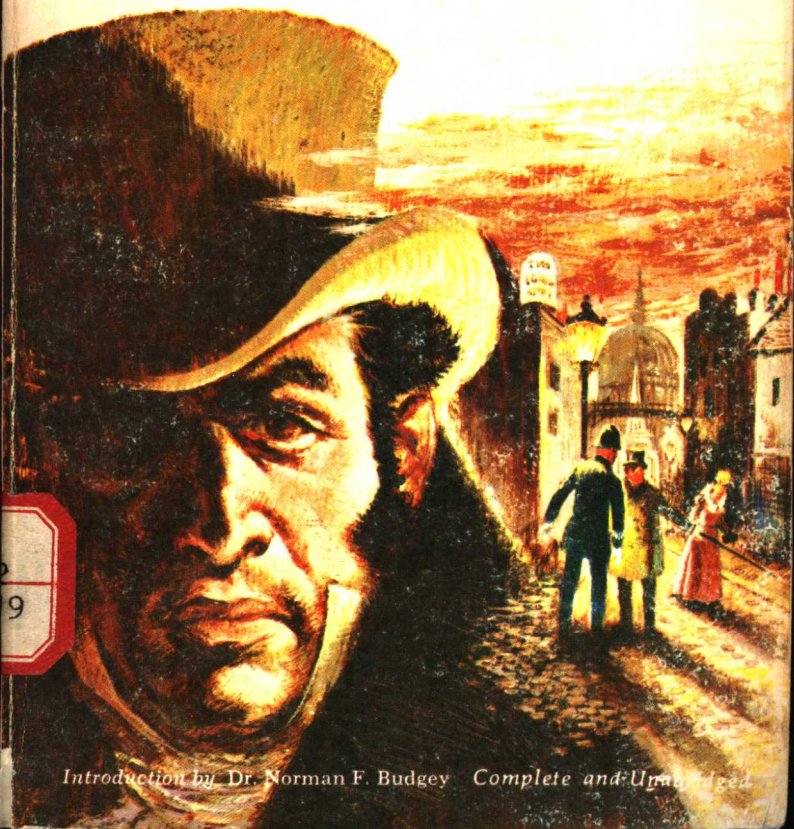


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CLASSICS SERIES CL114

**CHARLES DICKENS**

THE  
MYSTERY  
OF  
**EDWIN DROOD**



Introduction by Dr. Norman F. Budgey Complete and Unabridged

THE  
MYSTERY  
OF  
EDWIN DROOD

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**CHARLES DICKENS**

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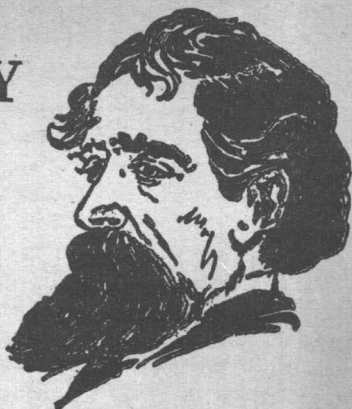
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# THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD



**CHARLES DICKENS**

## Introduction

The news of the death of Charles Dickens, sudden and unexpected, on June 9, 1870, hit England with the force of a national catastrophe. The *Times* of London announced the event with the words: "Charles Dickens is no more. The loss of such a man makes the ordinary expression of regret seem cold and conventional. It will be felt by millions as nothing less than a personal bereavement."

So great, indeed, was the shock occasioned by the passing of a man who, to the world at large, still seemed to be at the height of his powers that it dawned only slowly on the public that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, currently appearing in monthly installments, was unfinished and could probably never be finished.

In due course, when the matter was investigated, it was discovered that the author had not only left no notes but had left virtually no indication of the manner in which he had planned to solve the mystery. Edwin Drood vanishes from the story at the end of chapter fourteen and the following nine chapters carry on the narrative for a further six months. In the course of this time, Rosa has fled to her guardian in London, in order to escape the attentions of Jasper, and has met Mr. Tartar, the naval lieutenant, in whose company she is apparently destined to find consolation. Back in Cloisterham, meanwhile, a certain Mr. Datchery seems to be spending all his time prowling around the old city in the

manner of an amateur detective collecting evidence. Obviously he is someone in disguise, presumably one of the characters we have already met in the story. Perhaps he is Mr. Grewgious the lawyer or his enigmatic clerk Bazzard; some have even conjectured that the great white wig might conceal Drood himself. At all events, Mr. Datchery is a tireless and systematic investigator, and after a lucky stroke of fate has introduced him to the keeper of the opium den frequented by Jasper, he returns to his lodgings well satisfied with the day's work. He adds a final mark to the tally which he keeps in chalk on the cupboard door and then "falls to with an appetite." The solution to the mystery appears tantalizingly close. . . . Then the narration is broken off.

As early as two years after the death of Dickens, an American writer published the first tentative conclusion to the story. Other attempts followed and there has grown up a whole "Drood literature." The concensus of opinion among the hundred-odd writers of books and articles who have concerned themselves with the subject seems to be that the story was, indeed, almost concluded and that Datchery was about to pin the guilt of Drood's murder on Jasper. This is a rather depressing conclusion.

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was a venture in a new direction for Dickens. Possibly at the suggestion of his friend Wilkie Collins, Dickens had decided to turn his still restless talent to a novel of mystery and detection. It is true that with *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) his writing had taken on a more somber note and certainly the last completed novel is not one of the writer's greatest works, but the twenty-three chapters of *Edwin Drood* suggest that the author was right back on form. As early as 1868, he had announced that he was planning a work which was to be centered around the idea of a boy and a girl engaged but drifting apart. But he must have intended something more original than that, for, on August 6, 1869, in a letter to John Forster, he spoke of the same work and a "very curious and new idea for a story." In view of this remark, it seems strange that Forster should later assert that *Edwin Drood* was as good as finished and that it would only have been a matter of time before Jasper's guilt was revealed. Purporting to uphold the same opinion are statements by various members of the Dickens family and a written declaration by Sir Luke Fildes, the illustrator of the work, to the effect that Dickens had instructed him to lengthen Jasper's necktie as it

was going to be used to strangle Edwin. But to strangle does not necessarily mean to kill, and there remains the possibility that Forster, too, had misunderstood the intentions of the author. It is surely a grave injustice not to credit a writer of Dickens's fertile and inexhaustible imagination with a slightly more sophisticated concept of what is "very curious and new."

The only two pieces of real material evidence which have any bearing on the subject also seem to controvert Forster's assertion.

There has survived a list of sixteen tentative titles which, at some time or another, had apparently been considered for the work in question. This list is as follows:

The Loss of James Wakefield  
James's Disappearance  
Flight and Pursuit  
Sworn to Avenge It  
One Object in Life  
A Kinsman's Devotion  
The Two Kinsmen  
The Loss of Edwin Brood  
The Loss of Edwin Brude  
The Mystery in the Drood Family  
The Loss of Edwin Drood  
The Flight of Edwin Drood  
Edwin Drood in Hiding  
The Loss of Edwin Drude  
The Disappearance of Edwin Drood  
Dead? or Alive?

Such titles suggest a whole host of fascinating possibilities, but not one of them even hints at anything as unimaginative as the conclusion already discussed. It is also significant that the cover design for the first serial installments of the story, presumably approved by Dickens, featured a man at a crypt door brought suddenly face to face with what looks very much like another human being and certainly no ghost.

Upon cursory examination, such internal evidence as we can find in the story would appear to uphold Forster's contention. We see Jasper's nocturnal studies with Durdles and note the latter's assurance that the quicklime is "with a little handy stirring quick enough to eat your bones." We watch Jasper plant-



ing in Sapsea's mind the conviction that he has initiated the association between stone mason and organist. Then, after he has fomented the quarrel between Edwin Drood and Neville Landless, we hear Jasper spreading a vastly exaggerated account of the dispute. The night of the storm comes; the gale howls through the streets; chimneys topple, and in this too-perfect setting, Edwin Drood disappears. Neville is cleared despite all Jasper's attempts to implicate him. But all this is too obvious and too facile. There is no real reason why all these pointers, together with the rather involved business about Drood's possession of the ring, should not be deliberate attempts to mislead the reader and put him on a false scent. We have only to recollect how Pip, in *Great Expectations*, is led into concluding that the eccentric Miss Havisham is his benefactress and how this device serves to heighten the impact of Magwitch's revelation when it finally comes. At the risk of being accused of mere conjecture, we might point to the significance of the first chapter of *Great Expectations*, not apparent, of course, until long after, and ask ourselves whether *Edwin Drood* could possibly have been planned so that the first chapter would turn out to be largely irrelevant. Opium addiction, certainly among persons of Jasper's class, is not exactly an everyday weakness. Surely, the meeting with the organist of Cloisterham Cathedral in an opium den is intended to suggest a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. Might we not be excused, then, for assuming that this schizophrenic personality will be of material significance in the plot of the story which follows? If this is not the case, the ominous utterings of the old harridan who runs the den are pointless garrulity. But the issue can never be decided, and it must be left to the reader to reach his own conclusion. Perhaps, in a certain sense, this could be an added attraction to the story.

The first monthly number of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* ran to fifty thousand copies and Longfellow once suggested that the novel was Dickens's best work. It is difficult to arrive at any valid estimate of the plot structure of an unfinished work, but we may, of course, note that the suspense is being built up in a masterful fashion. On the other hand, there is in the work characterization which compares favorably with anything which Dickens had produced. Rosa is one of the writer's best portraits

of an immature young woman and Edwin is clearly intended to engage the sympathy of the reader.

But more powerful by far are the portrayals of Jasper, Sapsea, and the Reverend Honeythunder. As Graham Greene pointed out in his essay on the novel, evil seems to have had a much greater reality for Dickens than did good. In his depictions of maliciousness, cunning, hypocrisy, pomposity, and a host of other vices, the author achieves a degree of vividness only seldom attained in his portrayals of virtue. Throughout his life, Dickens apparently retained a faculty for seeing people with the unobscured vision of a child whose view is not inhibited by considerations of tact or social acceptability.

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was written at Gadshill, the country house from which Dickens could look across his beloved Kent toward Chatham and Rochester. So much has been made of the later hardships of life in the Dickens family that there is a tendency to forget the young Charles's relatively happy childhood. Cloisterham is Rochester, and we may detect a note of nostalgia in the undisguised affection with which the old city is described.

Perhaps, in some ways, the tragedy of Dickens's premature death was a blessing in disguise. He died at the height of his artistic and creative powers without ever knowing a period of senility. At the moment when he put down his pen for the last time by the unfinished manuscript of *Edwin Drood*, his reputation was as high as it had ever been. His inventiveness was infinite and by sheer force of imaginative power he compels us to accept the world which he has created. His fame has not diminished but, like that of Shakespeare, whose countryman and peer he was, has extended far beyond the bounds of his native land.

—NORMAN F. BUDGEY



## Chapter 1

### *THE DAWN*

An ancient English Cathedral tower? How can the ancient English Cathedral tower be there! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air between the eye and it from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe it is set up by the Sultan's orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colours, and infinite in number and attendants. Still the Cathedral Tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility.

Shaking from head to foot, the man whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together at length rises, supports his trembling frame upon his arms, and looks around. He is in the meanest and closest of small rooms. Through the ragged window-curtain the light of early day steals in from a miserable court. He lies, dressed, across a large unseemly bed, upon a bedstead that has indeed given way under the weight upon it. Lying, also dressed and also across the bed, not longwise, are a Chinaman, a Lascar, and a haggard woman. The two first are in a sleep or stupor; the last is blowing at a kind of pipe, to kindle it. And as she blows, and, shading it

with her lean hand, concentrates its red spark of light, it serves in the dim morning as a lamp to show him what he sees of her.

"Another?" says this woman, in a querulous, rattling whisper. "Have another?"

He looks about him, with his hand to his forehead.

"Ye've smoked as many as five since ye come in at midnight," the woman goes on, as she chronically complains. "Poor me, poor me, my head is so bad. Them two come in after ye. Ah, poor me, the business is slack, is slack! Few Chinamen about the Docks, and fewer Lascars, and no ships coming in, these say! Here's another ready for ye, deary. Ye'll remember like a good soul, won't ye, that the market price is dreffle high just now? More nor three shillings and sixpence for a thimbleful! And ye'll remember that nobody but me (and Jack Chinaman t'other side the court; but he can't do it as well as me) had the true secret of mixing it? Ye'll pay up according, deary, won't ye?"

She blows at the pipe as she speaks, and, occasionally bubbling at it, inhales much of its contents.

"Oh me, oh me, my lungs is weak, my lungs is bad! It's nearly ready for ye, deary. Ah, poor me, poor me, my poor hand shakes like to drop off! I see ye coming to, and I ses to my poor self, 'I'll have another ready for him, and he'll bear in mind the market price of opium, and pay according.' Oh my poor head! I makes my pipes of old penny ink-bottles, ye see, deary—this is one—and I fits in a mouthpiece, this way, and I takes my mixer out of this thimble with this little horn spoon, and so I fills, deary. Ah, my poor nerves! I got Heavens-hard drunk for sixteen year afore I took to this; but this don't hurt me, not to speak of. And it takes away the hunger as well as wittles, deary."

She hands him the nearly emptied pipe, and sinks back, turning over on her face.

He rises unsteadily from the bed, lays the pipe upon the hearthstone, draws back the ragged curtain, and looks with repugnance at his three companions. He notices that the woman has opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye, and temple, and his colour, are repeated in her. Said Chinaman convulsively wrestles with one of his many Gods or Devils, perhaps, and snarls horribly. The Lascar laughs and dribbles at the mouth. The hostess is still.

"What visions can *she* have?" the waking man muses, as he turns her face towards him, and stands looking down at it.

"Visions of many butchers' shops, and public-houses, and much credit? Of an increase of hideous customers, and this horrible bedstead set upright again, and this horrible court swept clean? What can she rise to, under any quantity of opium, higher than that!—Eh?"

He bends down his ear, to listen to her mutterings.

"Unintelligible!"

As he watches the spasmodic shoots and darts that break out of her face and limbs, like fitful lightning out of a dark sky, some contagion in them seizes upon him; insomuch that he has to withdraw himself to a lean arm-chair by the hearth—placed there, perhaps, for such emergencies—and to sit in it, holding tight, until he has got the better of this unclean spirit of imitation.

Then he comes back, pounces on the Chinaman, and, seizing him with both hands by the throat, turns him violently on the bed. The Chinaman clutches the aggressive hands, resists, gasps, and protests.

"What do you say?"

A watchful pause.

"Unintelligible!"

Slowly loosening his grasp as he listens to the incoherent jargon with an attentive frown, he turns to the Lascar and fairly drags him forth upon the floor. As he falls, the Lascar starts into a half-risen attitude, glares with his eyes, lashes about him fiercely with his arms, and draws a phantom knife. It then becomes apparent that the woman has taken possession of this knife, for safety's sake; for, she too starting up, and restraining and expostulating with him, the knife is visible in her dress, not in his, when they drowsily drop back, side by side.

There has been chattering and clattering enough between them, but to no purpose. When any distinct word has been flung into the air, it has had no sense or sequence. Wherefore "unintelligible!" is again the comment of the watcher, made with some reassured nodding of his head, and a gloomy smile. He then lays certain silver money on the table, finds his hat, gropes his way down the broken stairs, gives a good morning to some rat-ridden doorkeeper, in bed in a black hutch beneath the stairs, and passes out.

That same afternoon, the massive grey square tower of an old Cathedral rises before the sight of a jaded traveller. The

bells are going for daily vesper service, and he must needs attend it, one would say, from his haste to reach the open cathedral door. The choir are getting on their sullied white robes, in a hurry, when he arrives among them, gets on his own robe, and falls into the procession filing in to service. Then the Sacristan locks the iron-barred gates that divide the sanctuary from the chancel, and all of the procession having scuttled into their places, hide their faces, and then the intoned words, "WHEN THE WICKED MAN—" rise among groins of arches and beams of roof, awakening muttered thunder.

## Chapter 2

# A DEAN, AND A CHAPTER ALSO

Whosoever has observed that sedate and clerical bird, the rook, may perhaps have noticed that when he wings his way homeward towards nightfall, in a sedate and clerical company, two rooks will suddenly detach themselves from the rest, will retrace their flight for some distance, and will there poise and linger; conveying to mere men the fancy that it is of some occult importance to the body politic that this artful couple should pretend to have renounced connection with it.

Similarly, service being over in the old Cathedral with the square tower, and the choir scuffling out again, and divers venerable persons of rooklike aspect dispersing, two of these latter retrace their steps and walk together in the echoing Close.

Not only is the day waning, but the year. The low sun is fiery and yet cold behind the monastery ruin, and the Virginia creeper on the Cathedral wall has showered half its deep-red leaves down on the pavement. There has been rain this afternoon, and a wintry shudder goes among the little pools on the cracked uneven flagstones, and through the giant elm trees as they shed a gust of tears. Their fallen leaves lie strewn thickly about. Some of these leaves, in a timid rush, seek sanctuary within the low-arched Cathedral door, but two men coming out resist them, and cast them forth again with their feet; this done, one of the two locks the door with a goodly key and the other flits away with a folio music-book.

"Mr. Jasper was that, Tope?"

"Yes, Mr. Dean."

"He has stayed late."

"Yes, Mr. Dean. I have stayed for him, Your Reverence. He has been took a little poorly."

"Say 'taken,' Tope—to the Dean," the younger rook inter-



poses in a low tone with this touch of correction, as who should say: "You may offer bad grammar to the laity, or the humbler clergy, not to the Dean."

Mr. Tope, Chief Verger and Showman, and accustomed to be high with excursion parties, declines with a silent loftiness to perceive that any suggestion has been tendered to him.

"And when and how has Mr. Jasper been taken—for, as Mr. Crisparkle has remarked, it is better to say taken—taken—" repeats the Dean; "when and how has Mr. Jasper been 'taken'—"

"Taken, sir," Tope deferentially murmurs.

"—Poorly, Tope?"

"Why, sir, Mr. Jasper was that breathed——"

"I wouldn't say 'that breathed,' Tope," Mr. Crisparkle interposes with the same touch as before. "Not English—to the Dean."

"Breathed to that extent," the Dean (not unflattered by this indirect homage) condescendingly remarks, "would be preferable."

"Mr. Jasper's breathing was so remarkably short"—thus discreetly does Mr. Tope work his way round the sunken rock—"when he came in that it distressed him mightily to get his notes out, which was perhaps the cause of his having a kind of fit on him after a little. His memory grew DAZED"—Mr. Tope, with his eyes on the Reverend Mr. Crisparkle, shoots this word out, as defying him to improve upon it—"and a dimness and giddiness crept over him as strange as ever I saw, though he didn't seem to mind it particularly, himself. However, a little time and a little water brought him out of his DAZE." Mr. Tope repeats the word and its emphasis, with the air of saying: "As I *have* made a success, I'll make it again."

"And Mr. Jasper has gone home quite himself, has he?" asked the Dean.

"Your Reverence, he has gone home quite himself. And I'm glad to see he's having his fire-kindled up, for it's chilly after the wet and the Cathedral had both a damp feel and a damp touch this afternoon, and he was very shivery."

They all three look towards an old stone gatehouse crossing the Close, with an arched thoroughfare passing beneath it. Through its latticed window a fire shines out upon the fast-darkening scene, involving in shadow the pendent masses of ivy and creeper covering the building's front. As the deep Cathedral-bell strikes the hour, a ripple of wind goes through these at